

Hi, my name is Leticia Melendez. And this is my life wildlife. I am the Deputy refugee manager here at Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. I've always had an interest in animals ever since I was a child. I am originally from El Paso, Texas, and my father was an avid hunter. So he on his vacations would always take us to parks, and national wildlife refuges. And I was in awe of the feeling I got when I was on those, you know, great lands in God's country. And you know, when you went to these places and visited them, you could see and hear the excitement in the interpreters when they were educating and doing the outreach and getting the communities involved. And all of that just encompassed a feeling within me, but was just so deep down inside. And I didn't know how to pursue that and was in the medical field for 13 years. I worked in dialysis I specialized in dialysis. When I started working for a veterinarian and doing rehab on Raptors, and a red-tailed hawk that came into the clinic flew into the windshield of an oncoming car, when it sat in the cage and was just in shock and didn't really know what's what was going on in its surroundings, it was so vulnerable. And the fact that I didn't know what this bird was going to do, I didn't know how it was going to react to me, but I had to put some, some gloves on, you know, the veterinarian tells me here, we're going to get this this red tail Hawk out of this cat carrier, and I just can't imagine how I'm going to do that when I've got this big bird staring at me. And so he threw a towel over the crown of the red-tailed Hawk, which kind of gives him a sense of security, and asked me just to reach in carefully, and grab right in between the talons and hold the wings down and just come right on out of the cat carrier. And I did that. And the talons just opened up. And were the most scariest things to see those are, you know, surgically sharp, and he grabbed a towel and put a towel right into the talon of the red-tailed hawk. And those talons just came right down on that towel. And he did the same to the other. And so now we've got both talons, occupied and free of danger at that point. And so I stepped back. And he asked two of the technicians to grab the wings and pull the wings all the way out as far as they can go. And so now I've got the body of this red-tailed Hawk right in front of me, the wingspan five feet, you know, and these technicians are holding the tips of the wingspan supporting the wing and the doctor is ever so gently doing an examination of the wings checking for any broken bones. And after he does a thorough inspection and checks and make sure that the wings are okay. They bring the wings back in. And then he takes the towel off the crown of the red-tailed hawk. And so now I've got this red-tailed Hawk with these beautiful eyes that are you know, solid yellow in the back and, and black comparison at me with this huge yellow beak and it's just, you know, tilting its head back and forth and staring right at me and I'm thinking holy, what am I what's going to happen here and we're eye to eye, and it was at that moment that I got this rush within me it was an adrenaline rush, and it was one that was just heightened to the point where I don't I didn't know whether I wanted to cry or whether I wanted to scream and just let this bird go because I just didn't know what to expect. But yet I still felt calm enough to embrace what I was actually seeing and actually experiencing. So after the examination was done, and we put the bird back in the cat carrier and through the rehabilitation, it just brought all of that childhood exposure that my parents introduced me to it just brought it up to the surface and it just, it didn't just knock on the door. It blew the door wide open and said this is this is what you want to do. And that's the awakening moment for me. A friend of mine that I was working with who was attending New Mexico State University at the time, she was in what is called the STEP program. And through that program, it enables college students to work with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in the summer and ultimately gaining a

degree and And wildlife management is what she was going for. And she convinced me to re enroll in college and get a degree as she was and went home and contemplated on where my life was in what I wanted to do. And I went ahead and made the decision at 38 to get back into college and pursue this awakening passion within me. Graduated with a degree in wildlife management, and started my career on the East Coast, and worked at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge for four years, and then moved up to Cambridge, Maryland, where I worked at Blackwater for two years. To me, I was just trying to figure out where I wanted to go, I already knew that I was where I wanted to be. But now where do I go from here and grow in my career. So they ultimately suggested putting Alaska in my career path. And I had never even thought of ever moving to Alaska. And by that following May, I was moving to Cold Bay, Alaska. And that was in 2011. It was overwhelming when I got to Alaska as the plane landed. And I could see the landscape that was absolutely amazing, gorgeous, the the mountain tops, very different from you know, the desert, the desert has its beauty in El Paso, but it was a very stark contrast to what I was used to and bought up with. So it was amazing to see. It was It was shocking, but also exciting at the same time.

So we are very, very remote. The population here is approximately 50. And we influx in the summertime, to about 125. And so all your entertainment is basically in God's country, you are hunting, you're fishing, and just enjoying all of what we have here in this remote area to enjoy. That's probably 300 days out of the year, we have cloud cover. So the sunshine is something that we embrace and make sure that we're out in when we do get it but very remote and and people find it very challenging to live in such remote area.

When you sit on the Bluff, right behind my house, you have a full view of the bay. And in the surrounding area, if you just do a 360 you're surrounded by active volcanoes, snow topped mountains, and the water is just breathtaking. And that all grounds me and is brings me joy. Russell Creek is about a mile to two miles away from where I live, and you can sit in your vehicle and actually watch the bears fish. And they pounce on the on the salmon. You can see him playing in the water. You can see them jumping on these on these salmon and you know fighting with them as the salmon is just flipping all over in their mouth. And they're trying to walk up onto the bank, and they get up onto the bank, and once they get up onto the bank, you can actually watch them as they tear apart the salmon and then just look about while they're eating and just being able to witness that in real time. Just so close. It has been the most exciting thing for me. And it's and it was like clockwork, I can get in my truck at six o'clock in the evening and drive out to Russell Creek and I would be guaranteed to see at least eight or nine bears romping around jumping around, trying to catch that salmon, taking it up to the bank and enjoying their catch. Sometimes I could go out there and go fishing. And I would be casting my line and would be just reeling it in slowly and slowly just reeling it in, reeling it in and all of a sudden an eagle comes and dips down and touches the water and then comes right back up in front of you and flies right over your head. And you just watch that bird and the enormity of that bird fly right over your head and then you turn around and now you see a bear coming out from behind the bushes walking along the bank. And you just watch him and as long as you know that he's a good distance away from you. You could probably back up and just come really you're lying back in and find a place to fish because they're not going to bother you if you don't bother them. But the fact that I can go fishing and have a bear on the bank and eagles flying above me is amazing.

This has been My Life, Wildlife, a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs, producers Lisa Hupp, and Kris Pacheco produced in story edited by David Hoffman for citizen racecar audio editing sound design, in original music by Garrett Tiedemann artwork by Michelle Lawson. In Alaska, the employees of the US Fish and Wildlife Service are shared stewards of world renowned natural resources, and our nation's last true wild places. The lands and waters of this place we call home, nourish a vast and unique array of fish, wildlife and people. Our hope is that each generation has the opportunity to live with live from discover and enjoy the wildness of this odd inspiring land and the people who love and depend on it.